

Ursula Hirschmann: Anti-fascist and founding European federalist (1913-1991)



Born into a middle-class Jewish family in Berlin, in 1932 Ursula Hirschmann joined the youth organisation of the Social Democratic Party in resistance to the advance of the Nazis. After meeting and then marrying Eugenio Colorni, a young Italian philosopher and socialist, while in exile in Paris during the mid-1930s, Hirschmann became active in the clandestine anti-fascist opposition in his native Italy.

When Colorni was arrested and imprisoned on the island of Ventotene, she followed her husband there. There they met Ernesto Rossi and Altiero Spinelli, who, in 1941, co-authored the Ventotene Manifesto 'for a free and united Europe', widely regarded as the starting point for European federalism. The Manifesto was a blueprint for a democratic European Union that could be created after the war. Hirschmann smuggled the manifesto to mainland Italy and helped to disseminate it.

In August 1943 in Milan, she was one of the founders of the European Federalist Movement along with Spinelli, after his escape from Ventotene. In 1975, Hirschmann founded the Association Femmes pour l'Europe in Brussels.

Early years

Born in 1913, the young Ursula Hirschmann began her journey of political discovery and activism by attending events organised by both the Socialist and German Social Democratic Party in her home city of Berlin.

In 1932, the young Jewish economics student's path took a more radical turn, which saw her become involved with communist resistance groups. A year later, with the Nazi crackdown on opposition groups gaining pace, she and her brother Albert (who would become a prominent economist and political scientist in later life) moved to Paris. This was the beginning of a long exile for Hirschmann and a turning point in her conversion to the cause of European federalism.

While in Paris, she and Albert met Eugenio Colorni, a young Italian philosopher and socialist whom they had known in Berlin. Following him back to Italy, Hirschmann married Colorni in 1935.

The couple became heavily involved in the anti-fascist movement in Italy. However, this radical activism led to Colorni's arrest and exile to the island of Ventotene. Hirschmann gained permission from the authorities to follow Colorni to Ventotene, where they met other anti-fascist intellectuals such as Altiero Spinelli and Ernesto Rossi.

At the birth of European federalism

This meeting of minds eventually led to the 1941 Ventotene Manifesto, 'for a free and united Europe'. Written secretly on cigarette papers, the Manifesto was both a political statement and a blueprint for a democratic federation of Europe. The Manifesto called

for a break with Europe's past to form a new political system through a restructuring of politics and extensive social reform.

After escaping from Ventotene, Ursula managed to bring the text of the Manifesto to the mainland and helped to draft and disseminate it. It was widely read by those fighting with the Italian resistance against the Nazis. Hirschmann arrived in Milan and, with Spinelli and other activists, founded the *Movimento Federalista Europeo*, the European Federalist Movement, in 1943, as Allied forces pushed into Italy from the south. It was in Milan that the first meeting for the constitution of the federalist movement was held in August of that year, leading to the approval of the six cornerstones of federalist thought that were conceived in Ventotene.

Eugenio Colorni was murdered by fascists in Rome in 1944. Hirschmann married Altiero Spinelli the following year. They fled to Switzerland where they worked together to internationalise the European Federalist Movement, which led to Hirschmann's involvement in organising the first international federalist congress in Paris in 1945. The couple eventually settled in Rome.

Hirschmann's political commitment did not end after the Second World War. In 1975, she founded the *Association Femmes pour l'Europe* (Women for Europe) in Brussels, a movement that brought together women from both feminist and political circles and continues to promote gender equality.

Ursula Hirschmann had three daughters, Silvia, Renata, and Eva, by her first husband Eugenio Colorni, and three daughters with Altiero Spinelli: Diana, Sara, and the Italian journalist and parliamentarian Barbara Spinelli. In December 1975, Hirschmann suffered a cerebral haemorrhage, from which she never fully recovered. She died in 1991 aged 77.